Australian Bureau of Statistics

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ABS Not Compromising Neutrality

On Wednesday, 12 June 2002, the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) will release Issue Analysis No. 25 by Professor Peter Saunders titled 'Whose Progress? A Response to the ABS Report **Measuring Australia's Progress'.**

The CIS paper makes many assertions that are not based on fact. The author has misread and misrepresented important parts of our publication. Other assertions in his paper are based on erroneous speculations about the processes that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) followed when developing **Measuring Australia's Progress.** Before his paper was published, the ABS wrote to Professor Saunders drawing attention to his errors - but he has persisted with many of them.

"The Australian Bureau of Statistics rejects the allegation in Professor Saunders' paper (repeated in the CIS Media Release) that the ABS risks compromising its reputation for political neutrality," said Acting Australian Statistician, Mr Rob Edwards.

"Australians have a right to be proud that they have a national statistical office whose data, analysis and interpretations are always objective.

"We decide what to publish, and then do so in ways which explain and inform, without advocating a particular position.

"We absolutely disagree with any suggestion that we have not been objective in the preparation of **Measuring Australia's Progress."**

Professor Saunders says that the ABS is 'telling us how "progress" should be measured'. This is false. **Measuring Australia's Progress** says:

> 'There can be no definitive answer [to the question about whether Australia has progressed in the past decade], because we all have our own views about what is important to individual and national life...The ABS hopes that Australians will use [the] indicators to form their own views of how our country is progressing.'

Professor Saunders argues that, '...the set of 15 indicators the ABS uses to measure "social progress" are skewed towards a broadly green and left-wing agenda', especially through its 'heavy emphasis on environmental measures'. This is false. The number of indicators under each broad heading has nothing to do with any political agenda. It has to do with the nature of the available statistics. **Measuring Australia's Progress** says:

> 'Overall progress...should not be assessed by simply counting the number of areas getting better and subtracting those getting worse. Some aspects of progress (especially aspects such as national income and national wealth) are more easily encapsulated in a small number of indicators than are some social and environment aspects of progress.'

Professor Saunders argues that, 'There is also bias in the selection of "economic disadvantage and inequality" as a progress measure' and 'The ABS thinks that greater income inequality indicates social

progress'. This is false. The relevant ABS headline indicator refers to economically disadvantaged households, not to overall income inequality. **Measuring Australia's Progress** does not assert that a change in income inequality is an indicator of either national progress or regress; income distribution is not one of our headline indicators for that very reason.

Professor Saunders says that, 'the ABS decided what should be included as a progress measure and what shouldn't by consulting experts, most of whom specialise in environmental and equality issues'. This is mischievous. When considering what dimensions and indicators should be included in **Measuring Australia's Progress**, the ABS directly consulted hundreds of experts and lay people, government agencies and other organisations. We also conducted open consultation sessions in every capital city. Our consultation process is described, and the many people and organisations from whom we received assistance are listed, in our publication. At the end of a year-long process, the ABS decided on statistical grounds what compact set of indicators would be included in the first issue of our publication.

The ABS wrote to Professor Saunders on 27 May 2002 correcting these and other errors in a draft of his paper that had been provided to us a few days earlier. Regrettably, many of those errors have found their way into the published version of the paper. The ABS asked - in the interest of open debate and fair play- that our comments be published alongside his arguments. This request was refused. More recently, the ABS has asked that the CIS publish our rejoinder as part of its Issue Analysis series.

Measuring Australia's Progress (cat. no. 1370.0) was released on 4 April 2002. It was deliberately experimental in nature. In his foreword to the publication the Australian Statistician invited feedback on how to improve future issues of the publication. After we receive that feedback, we will then decide if and how we should proceed with future issues.

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